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A BIT OF CHAUCER MYTHOLOGY

The link that connects Chaucer's "Prioress' Tale" with the "Rime of Sir Thopas" has long been believed to reveal a glimpse of the figure, the expression, and the personality of the poet. The inferences generally drawn from these twenty-one lines have been that Chaucer's waist was stout, that he habitually turned his eyes to the ground, that his face was "elvish," and that he was of a modest and retiring disposition which would not permit him to mingle with his companions on terms of good fellowship.

The first account of Chaucer into which statements of this nature were incorporated was that prefixed to the edition of the poet's works which was started by Urry.[1] Those parts of the introduction which are based on this link are as follows:

The latter part of his Life inclinable to be fat and corpulent, as appears by the Host's bantering him in the Journey to *Canterbury*, and comparing shapes with him.[2] . . . . his eyes inclining usually to the ground, which is intimated by the Host's words.[3] . . . . We see nothing merry or jocose in his behaviour with his Pilgrims, but a silent attention to their mirth, rather than any mixture of his own; and when he is called upon by *Harry Baily* the Host, and rouzed out of his thoughtful Lethargy to tell a Tale, he endeavours to put it off by singing an old Ballad; but that not satisfying the Company, the Tale he tells is grave, moral and instructive.[4]

This view of the significance of the lines was accepted by Tyrwhitt in the following words:

Next to *the Prioresse* CHAUCER himself is called upon for his Tale. In the *Prologue* he has dropped a few touches descriptive of his own person

[1] *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, John Urry, London, 1721. This edition was started by Urry in 1711, and after his death in 1715 was continued by Timothy Thomas. The *Life of Chaucer* was originally composed by John Dart, but before publication was altered by William Thomas, Timothy's brother.

[2] Here a note refers to the lines:

"Now ware you, Sirs, and let this man have place,
He in the waste is shapen as wel as I,
This were a popet in armes to enbrace, &c."

[3] Here a note refers to the lines:

"What man art thou? (quoth he)
Thou lookist as thou wouldist find an hare,
For evir on the ground I se The stare."
—Urry's *Chaucer*, folio "e," p. 3.

[4] *Ibid.*, folio "e," p. 4.

and manner, by which we learn, that he was used to look much upon the the ground; was of a corpulent habit; and reserved in his behaviour.[1]

Tyrwhitt's view of the meaning of the link has been followed more or less closely by Godwin, Nicolas, Morley, Ward, Jusserand, Courthope, Skeat, Pollard, and Root.[2]

A re-examination of the contents of the link, however, and of its relations with the preceding and the following tales may perhaps reveal a significance hitherto unobserved. We may as a consequence be led to classify some parts of the current interpretation as mythological, and we may therefore find ourselves rejecting these parts; but perhaps by way of compensation we shall find ourselves able to appreciate even more fully and keenly than before some phases of Chaucer's skill as a literary artist. The link in full is as follows:

Whan seyd was al this miracle, every man
As sobre was that wonder was to se,
Til that our hoste Iapen tho bigan,
And than at erst he loked up-on me,
And seyde thus, "what man artow?" quod he;
"Thou lokest as thou woldest finde an hare,
For ever up-on the ground I see thee stare.

"Approche neer, and loke up merily.
Now war yow, sirs, and lat this man have place;
He in the waast is shape as wel as I;
This were a popet in an arm tenbrace
For any womman, smal and fair of face.
He semeth elvish by his contenaunce,
For un-to no wight dooth he daliaunce.

"Sey now somwhat, sin other folk han sayd;
Tel us a tale of mirthe, and that anoon;"—
"Hoste," quod I, "ne beth nat yvel apayd,
For other tale certes can I noon,
But of a ryme I lerned longe agoon."

[1] *The Canterbury Tales of Chaucer*, Thomas Tyrwhitt, I, 106. (I quote from the second edition, Oxford, 1798.)

[2] William Godwin, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, (2d ed., 1804), IV, 182; *Poetical Works of Chaucer*, Aldine ed., I, 54 (I cite the edition of 1893. The *Memoir of Chaucer* was originally written by Sir Harris Nicolas in 1844, and prefixed to the Aldine edition in 1845); Henry Morley, *English Writers*, V, 305; A. W. Ward, *Chaucer* ("English Men of Letters" Series), 144–45, 146; J. J. Jusserand, *Hist. lit. de la peuple anglaise*, I, 347; W. J. Courthope, *History of English Poetry*, I, 291; W. W. Skeat, *Complete Works of Chaucer* (Oxford ed.), I, liv (in V, 182, he quotes Tyrwhitt substantially, and says "probably correct"); *Globe Edition*, xxi; R. K. Root, *The Poetry of Chaucer*, 30–32.

"Ye, that is good," quod he; "now shul we here
Som deyntee thing, me thinketh by his chere."

The first two lines, the bearing of the preceding tale on them, and their bearing on the rest of the link, have received no attention in the current interpretation.[1] The tendency to overlook these lines, and consequently to miss the close connection between the link and the previous tale, is perhaps originally due to the presence and the phrasing of the colophon and the titles which intervene between tale and link in the MSS and the printed editions.[2] After the Urry *Life* had disposed all subsequent readers to regard the later lines of the link with special interest, the attention of readers and editors was focused on these later lines, and away from the first two. And during this later stage, of course, the colophon and title have continued to turn attention toward the following tale and to divert attention away from the connection between the first lines and the preceding tale. In fact, so far as we may infer from the writings of historians of English literature (except ten Brink and Ward) who have expressed themselves on this point, the link has not been regarded as a link at all, but merely as a prologue to Sir Thopas. Let us glance again at the opening lines of the passage:

Whan seyd was al this miracle, every man
As sobre was that wonder was to se,
Til that our hoste Iapen tho bigan—

[1] ten Brink, *Geschichte der Eng. Lit.*, II, 180, in his paraphrase and running comment, does speak of the emotional effect produced by the "Prioress's Tale" upon the pilgrims, but he sees no connection between this and the Host's description of Chaucer. See *infra*, 4, n. 4. Likewise Ward, 144–45.

[2] Caxtons I and II I have been unable to consult, but Miss Eleanor Prescott Hammond is kind enough to furnish the following notes, taken from the British Museum copies: Caxton I, "Last 5 lines of tale [Prioress's], and colophon, on 260 recto. No heading to link." Caxton II, "Foot of 220 verso, colophon of tale [Prioress's]. Top of 221 recto, 'Here foloweth the prologue of Chaucer's Tale.'" From Thynne's ed., (1532) till Urry's (1721), the colophon and title read (with only slight differences in the spelling) "Here endeth the Prioresse tale. And / here folowe the wordes of the / Host to Chaucer." The sole exception is Speght's second edition (1602), which has only: "Here foloweth the wordes of the / Hoste to Chaucer." Tyrwhitt, the Aldine edition, and Wright have: "Prologue (Prologe) to Sire Thopas." Skeat has: "Here is ended the Prioresses Tale. / PROLOGUE TO SIR THOPAS. / Bihold the murye wordes of the Host to Chaucer." The Globe edition has: "Bihoold the murye wordes of the Hoost to Chaucer." As regards the MSS, Ellesmere, Hengwrt, and Cambridge Gg. 4.27 have the colophon and title nearly as in Urry (some variants). Corpus has merely "Explicit." Harleian 7334 has no title, colophon, or break. Petworth has the "Man of Law's Tale" following the "Prioress's." Lansdowne has: "Explicit fabula priorisse / Incipit prologus de Thopas." Cambridge Dd. 4.24 reads: "Hic desinit fabula priorisse / & incipit / prologus de Sir Thopas per Chaucer narratus."

That is to say, the tale of the "litel clergeon" affected the whole company so much that "wonder was to se." Finally the Host, perhaps a trifle ashamed of his unusual emotion, breaks the silence. And of course, with characteristic indelicacy, he blunders out a crudely humorous reference to the obvious emotion on the poet's face. For the statement that Chaucer is staring on the ground[1] can hardly signify anything else than that he is in the same emotional condition as all the rest of the pilgrims. This inference is supported by the next line, "Approche neer, and loke up *merily*." The reference in the following four lines to the size of Chaucer's waist is doubtless to be taken literally. The jesting here, and in the remainder of the Host's speech, aims to bring Chaucer to his merry self again. But not even yet has the poet recovered his usual countenance, as we may see in the references to his elvishness[2] and to his continued silence—"unto no wight dooth he daliaunce."[3] Finally, however, at the direct demand that he "sey now somwhat," and at the specification of a "tale of mirthe, and that anoon"—something that will give the Host the revulsion of feeling that he craves—the poet experiences a violent reaction in his own breast, so that Bailly says, "Now shul we here Som deyntee thing, me thinketh by his chere."

And perhaps the reason for the exuberance of the travesty in "Sir Thopas" is to be found in this altogether natural revulsion of feeling indicated in the last lines of the link.

Some confirmation of my interpretation will be found in the circumstance, pointed out by ten Brink, that the effect of the "Prioress's Tale" is exhibited in the versification, which continues through the link in the same stanza as that employed by the Prioress.[4]

Further support is given by the removal of the hitherto apparent inconsistency between this link and those lines in the general prologue

[1] Of course the word "ever" applied to "stare upon the ground" is undoubtedly due to emotional exaggeration: the meaning is "steadily, fixedly at this moment."

[2] "Elvish" would seem to apply to the look of "other-worldliness" caused by the mingling of pity and sympathy and strong religious feeling.

[3] That is, he is not laughing and talking after his usual fashion, even the remarks of the Host failing to provoke the expected sally of wit.

[4] "Die Wirkung dieser rührenden Legende ist aus dem ernsten Schweigen der ganzen Wallfahrtsgesellschaft ersichtlich und äussert sich auch in der Darstellung des Dichters, der in dem sich anschliessenden Verbindungstück die von der Priorin verwandte siebenzeilige Strophe festhält. An diesem Punkt setzt Chaucer mit liebenswürdigem Humor sich selber in Scene."—ten Brink, *Geschichte der Eng. Lit.*, zweiter Band, 180.

in which Chaucer pictures himself as the leading spirit in organizing the party,[1] and later as communing intimately with the monk, and slyly making fun of that worthy's remarks.[2]

And finally, it may not be impertinent here to point out that my view of the significance emotionally of this whole passage both supports, and is supported by, Professor Kittredge's interpretation of the close of the "Pardoner's Tale,"[3] and thus helps to throw light on the subtlety of Chaucer's art in representing the emotional experiences of his characters.

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[1] *Prolog*, ll. 30–34.

[2] *Ibid.*, l. 182.

[3] *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXII (December, 1893), 829.